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*As submitted to members of Congress on October 18, 2005:*

I write this letter on behalf of the people of Louisiana to address some of the rhetoric and political statements I have heard from many of your colleagues and others around the nation regarding the State of Louisiana. I am most concerned about the perception being portrayed of Louisiana's political, business and community leaders as corrupt or unethical.

Louisiana has a special uniqueness, no one else can duplicate. Louisiana's culture is rooted in the traditions of its people passed down from one generation to another, steeped in our rich and diverse heritage and a multi-ethnic history that spans nearly three hundred years. Nobody denies that our history includes political abuse by some of our elected, business and community leaders; however, like so many other places in our nation, our past is our past and we hope that as you make decisions that will impact our future you will judge us based on the records of our current leaders, not the transgressions of the past.

Current Governor Kathleen Blanco (D) has followed in the footsteps of former Governor Mike Foster's (R) pragmatic style of scandal free governing and above-board practices and ethics. Governor Blanco has committed to hiring one of the country's top four accounting firms to monitor transactions related to the relief efforts. Louisiana's independent Public Affairs Research Council is working to strengthen the state's accountability processes.

I question the political tactics of basically "kicking our state" while it is down. Almost two months ago, we were hit by the most destructive natural disaster in the country's history. About one million of Louisiana's sons and daughters were driven from their homes. Almost 11,304 American citizens are still in shelters in eleven states, 6,747 are in Louisiana shelters. We have lost 40% of our businesses. At least 1,035 of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and neighbors have died. Now, we come to Congress – the voice of the American people to seek help. And yet, in the media, at the office water cooler, at the family dinner table and even in the hallways of the Capitol, we have been made to feel corrupt, selfish and unworthy of aid. Perhaps, most upsetting is the fact that these cries of caution never surfaced in Florida last year, never surfaced in Mississippi or Texas this year, or in New York after 9/11.

Louisiana does not have exclusive rights to political corruption. In the past ten years, the Governors of New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Arizona, Illinois, Ohio and Alabama have all be indicted on charges ranging from conspiracy to fraud, to exhortation to bribery to ethics violations. New York, Illinois and Florida have at least twice the number of federal convictions of corrupt public officials than Louisiana. California has more than triple the number. This myth that Louisiana politics is more politically corrupt than other states in this great nation is as

fallacious as most of the rumors about the storm and our people that were reported by the mainstream media as fact, when we now know they were grossly exaggerated.

I can assure you that Louisiana has too much at stake to allow a penny of relief funds to be wasted on political shenanigans. For too long we allowed the politics of the day to halt progress that was necessary to address the most critical socio-economic issues of our time. As we rebuild, it is my hope that we use this opportunity and investment to address the root causes of poverty that have created a class system that has held so many back – a failing public education system, inadequate access to health care and technology, poorly planned communities that divide rather than foster diversity and thereby create poverty zones that have failed our people.

This is not a problem unique to New Orleans – most urban centers (and some rural areas) have similar issues. Let's use this time to find common sense solutions that can address these issues. Throughout history we have had leaders who have risen to the challenges to make our country stronger in times of adversity. It is our time. Louisiana has shared her culture, music, food, festivals, literature, art, and so much more with the nation and the world.

Every community in Louisiana was impacted in some way by these storms. The people who have lost so much are American families, and they deserve to see their nation's leaders engaged in serious debate about the recovery efforts to rebuild our homes and communities. The people of my state are honest citizens who want their lives back, and they remain hopeful that you will engage in less political rhetoric and unfounded accusations, and more thoughtful debate about how we are going to rebuild one of America's great cities.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild a state relying on Louisiana's rich cultural heritage. Through this tragedy, Louisiana's power to change will be the model for the nation when we lean forward, rather than blink.

Sincerely,

Mitchell J. Landrieu

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